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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 000243

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: SAADA: PARLIAMENT VOTES FOR WAR, BUT OVER WHAT?

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Classified By: DCM NABEEL KHOURY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: In a closed session on February 10, Parliament voted to authorize President Saleh to use military force against al-Houthi insurrectionists in Saada. Opposition party leaders have kept a low-profile in public, but indicated privately that their parties voted overwhelmingly against the measure. Echoing comments made by a range of Embassy contacts, these leaders believe that the roots of the conflict are a complicated mix of political and tribal manipulation, influenced by religious ideology. The Government and the al-Houthis share the blame for the conflict and must now compromise in order to resolve it. Particularly, the Government must show consistency in how it deals with Saada compared to other governorates in the administration of mosques and schools, as well as the disposition of security forces. The al-Houthis must overcome past grievances, accept that the republican system cannot be replaced by a sectarian regime, and work within the system to achieve change. The al-Houthis' precise political aims and political organization remain unclear even to these seasoned oppositionists. END SUMMARY

PARLIAMENT VOTES FOR WAR

[12.](#) (C) Parliament met in closed session on February 10 and received a briefing from National Security Bureau Director Ali al-Ansi. Opposition and independent media outlets complained that their reporters were not allowed to cover the session, but pro-government newspapers claimed that the Parliament "urge the Government to end the al-Houthi sedition" and take legal action against members of a mediation committee that had originally enjoyed the Government's support. (NOTE: The mediation committee is headed by the Saada governor, who was appointed as a political concession to the al-Houthis after the last round of major fighting ended in early 2006. According to opposition contacts, the Governor is now perceived as being

too close to the al-Houthis and is being branded a "traitor" by some, particularly in the sensationalist press associated with the regime. END NOTE)

OPPOSITION QUIET BUT FRUSTRATED-----

13. (C) In a private meeting with DCM and PolChief, Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) Secretary General Dr. Yassin Said Noman and Islah Secretary General Abdulwahab al-Ansi said that their parties had voted overwhelming against the authorization to use force. Asked why the two main opposition parties have been quiet thus far on the third round of fighting in Saada, al-Ansi replied that the opposition had taken a strong public stance against the use of violence when the Government launched its first major offensive against the al-Houthis in 2004. Al-Ansi had participated actively in mediation efforts at that time, and felt that the Government threw up so many obstacles to those efforts that the mediation committee became frustrated. Al-Ansi said that there is a feeling among the opposition that the Government is determined to take military action, and there is little the parties can do to block it, but the opposition press has been vocal in its criticisms of the Government.

WHAT IS THIS WAR ABOUT, ANYWAY?

14. (C) Al-Ansi and Noman advised that military force alone would not solve the problem and that both sides would need to

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accept part of the blame for the continued conflict and return to the negotiating table to find a solution. Echoing comments made by other post contacts (refrels), they opined that the conflict should not be seen as primarily a Sunni-Shia clash. While the al-Houthis' brand of Shi'ism plays a role in their thinking, there are tribal and historical elements to the conflict that are at least as important.

15. (C) According to these party leaders, the al-Houthis feel wronged by the Saleh regime because it was Saleh himself who "played the religion card first." Saleh financed and facilitated the al-Houthis' religious studies in Iran, where they established ties to the religious community in Qom, and then gave them control over mosques and schools when they returned to Yemen in order to counter growing Salafi influence in Saada in particular. As the al-Houthis began to grow into a more popular political force, particularly with armed elements, Saleh gradually moved to replace al-Houthi preachers and administrators with Salafi or Shafi' preachers in Saada mosques and schools. The al-Houthis felt betrayed and increasingly hemmed in, both ideologically and politically.

16. (C) To the extent that the al-Houthis have a political program -- which is not at all clear at this point -- it is to return Yemen to imamic rule, according to Noman and al-Ansi. The al-Houthis see no benefit from the republican system, but view it simply as having replaced religious authoritarianism with a secular one. Given the choice between "dictatorships," according to Noman, the al-Houthis would rather it be a religious one.

SO HOW DO WE FIX IT?

17. (C) Prodded into focusing on what is actually on the negotiating table and how it should be dealt with, our interlocutors suggested the Government must make the republican system work consistently for all of the people, including the al-Houthis. This means development assistance

for Saada, but also a commitment to keeping the Government out of local mosques. The Government should determine what constitutes a "red line" in terms of mosque preachers' speech if they are inciting followers to action, but in general, the Government should allow mosques to stay under local control and for preachers to exercise the right of political expression.

¶18. (C) The Government must also not treat Saada differently from other governorates when it comes to the disposition of security forces. If areas under tribal control are respected in al-Jawf and Marib, for example, then they should also be respected in Saada. The Government cannot insist on controlling every mountain-top in Saada when it does not insist on the same conditions elsewhere. Likewise, the Government must respect tribal traditions when dealing with the al-Houthis -- who are above all else tribesmen -- and not deal with them solely on a military basis.

¶19. (C) The al-Houthis, for their part, must compromise by accepting the republican system and working within it. They must also accept that schools are not religious institutions, but are places in which children should learn about republicanism, their rights under the constitution, and good civics in general.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Noman and al-Ansi are two of the most respected members of the opposition, and their analysis of the situation is the best we have heard from any of our contacts thus far. Noman, a secular southerner and al-Ansi, a Shafi' Islamist northerner, are beholden neither to the Government's nor to the al-Houthis' views on this issue, so it is not surprising that they believe that both sides need to admit their mistakes and compromise if the conflict is to be resolved without further bloodshed.

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¶11. (C) While this cool-headed analysis is the most likely path to peace and stability in Saada, there currently are no signs that either the Government or the al-Houthis are willing to follow it. This confrontation has become a very emotional and personal issue for Saleh and Abdul Malik al-Houthi and his followers, a fact that indicates to us that another major military confrontation will probably take place before both sides are willing to sit down to serious negotiations again. Like most issues in Yemen, this conflict is rooted in a complex mix of personal, tribal, military and political considerations -- all of which are influenced by the religious beliefs of the al-Houthis and Government supporters, but are not exclusively governed by them.

KRAJESKI